

## **Reality and Authenticity in the Experience Economy**

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We move about in an increasingly media-saturated environment. In suburb and city, the quiet of nature has become harder to experience on a daily basis, as has the quiet of Classical and 'classic' Modernist architecture – buildings that radiate that they are what they are, that they have already said what there is to be said, that although they stand by us and for us, they do not seek to persuade. Reality – this quieter reality, anyway – is under threat, as well as authenticity, which is the authority that comes with being real in just this way.

Some argue that this state of affairs is an ineluctable consequence of the evolution of our economy. Increasingly, as we make our livings and seek our pleasures in the fields of information created by others, more of us are drawn into working in a new kind of economy – one beyond the familiar 'information economy.' Today we live and work in the 'experience economy.' In a book of this name, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore argue that as free-market capitalism evolves, the locus for the creation of new value (and, with it, the locus of new profits) shifts from the production, distribution, and consumption of material goods, first to services, then to information, then to experiences. This development can be seen as a counterthrust to a simultaneous movement in the opposite direction: the steady devolution, under routine price competition, of hundreds of once estimable goods and once luxurious services to low profit commodities and automated services.

The focus of more and more of our creativity, then, is not things, really, nor services as 'parcels' of useful labor, but information fields, treated as private property, in which memorable and entertaining experiences can be had. Restaurants compete in atmosphere and service, with the becoming more like art on a plate, and waiters more like actors. Climate-controlled shopping streets become 'Roman marketplaces'; gigantic suburban bookstores imitate old-time intimate ones with living room furniture, readings, and espresso bars; movie houses become movie 'palaces' again (but, much more economically, set off of freeways), and so it goes. At children's hospitals, patients become explorers, 'embarking on a journey to recovery,' while new housing developments imitate historic or imagined small-town life (if at quadruple the density). In short, every place, every product, every service and event in the experience economy becomes themed, as though it were part of an endless carnival.

These developments have not been lost on architects, of course. Ever since Postmodernism broke through late-Modernist orthodoxy in the early 1970s, more and more architects have joined in the business of entertaining with their buildings, that is, providing pleasurable experiences. Although rather few architects today are interested in perpetuating the classical-historical pastiche that Postmodernism first favored, many are still interested in the proposition that all buildings – not just amusement parks, museums, hotels, aquaria, and such – ought to provide exciting and memorable encounters, albeit with trendier shards and curves or luminous twisted volumes crammed with electronic paraphernalia. Follow this trend and extend it, and ultimately we must arrive at a new general understanding of architecture – to wit, architecture as experience à la Jon Jerde or, let it be admitted, Frank Gehry – a new baseline as to what the word *experience* means in the everyday.

Given architecture's long history of providing visitors marvelous experiences – from Rome to Disneyland – why does the thought of our whole economy mutating into an experience economy not thrill every architect to the marrow? Might such architects' misgivings belie nothing more than elitism with respect to popular culture? Might it belie the fear of not being able to compete successfully with other experience-producing industries, like film, music, sports, and television? Maybe.

But perhaps architects who worry about the rise of the experience economy are onto something more significant. Like canaries in the proverbial coalmine, they could be registering a disturbing shift in modern culture, namely, the loss of a healthy balance between what is real in life and what is not – between what is authentic and what is not – and of the balance between these qualities that architecture has historically been instrumental in providing.

Every person has an abiding need to make this related set of discriminations between the actual and the illusory, between fact and fiction, the natural and the artificial, the material and the nonmaterial, the significant and the trivial, the authentic and the fake...and so on. Why? So that at the very least we can freely choose between them, or, more basically, because without the ability to make such binary discriminations we could not function at all. Let's try to take this thought to architecture.

As I pointed out in *For an Architecture of Reality*, realness in buildings has four elemental components: presence, significance, materiality, and emptiness. Very briefly: 'Presence' is about a building's perceptual clarity and self-confidence; 'significance' about its involvement in people's lives; 'materiality' is the building's physicality, its heft, temperature, airiness; and, finally, 'emptiness' is about a building's lack of didacticism, a sort of indifference and generosity that we can't or don't want to explain. These four qualities also comprise our sense of reality about everything else. But buildings, which routinely and everywhere embody all four to some degree, play the important role of providing people with benchmark examples of what reality is and what the experience of reality feels like. This standard-bearing is all the more needed when we live in a mediated and media-filled world. Buildings that have a powerful presence, significance, materiality, and emptiness serve as touchstones against which more ephemeral human productions are shown to be less fully real, though perhaps no less important for life's richness. On this accounting, the play is less real than the set, which is less real than the theater, which is less real than the hill covered by the street.

I am in no way ignoring architecture's many long flirtations with illusion and artifice. Poised between nature and culture, architecture, even at its most fanciful, has always shown two faces at once, the real and the unreal. However much artifice architecture has historically indulged – and it has – the face of reality has always shone through as a matter of technological, physical necessity. One could not see the trompe-l'oeil angels without also seeing the heavy vaults they were painted on. With today's lightweight construction methods, and late-20<sup>th</sup>- and early-21<sup>st</sup>-century attitudes toward reality, the situation has changed. When so many building types are reduced to card-thin containers; when any shape dreamed of can, with computers, be rigged with light steel, plastic, gypsum, and glass; when *reality* is a word seldom printed or pronounced without quotes or a knowing chuckle, only economic constraints keep us from building our most extreme architectural fantasies.

Some architects have responded to the potential horror of the situation by regressing, as it were, to Miesian Modernism, that is, to stringent economy of form and absolute 'honesty' of construction. They refuse to indulge in the formal and semantic possibilities offered by the full range of contemporary construction technologies. Others are more eager to explore these possibilities, but at the same time, in the name of Modernist honesty, feel compelled to expose structure, fabrication, joints, and ductwork to public view. Yet others are quite comfortable creating dramatic and themed spaces – as long as they can be frank about the artifice. But honesty and frankness are not enough, since most of the facts that buildings portray are up to architects to choose in the first place. The quest, rather, is for authenticity, which is the authority that comes from being real without trying.

And there's the rub. The moment one tries to be real, tries to be authentic, and the trying is detected, the bubble bursts and inauthenticity spills out. But all is not lost; there is some middle ground. The best actors can make us forget they're acting. Affecting nonaffectation (unless their characters are affected), they somehow remain true to themselves as persons and true to the characters they portray, reconstituting them into singular and wholly new personalities. Can architects – or, rather, their buildings – do the same? One might argue that the 'willing suspension of disbelief' that is prerequisite to the functioning of the theater and movies works unfairly in the actors' favor. But, in truth, a parallel and equally willing suspension of disbelief works in the architects' favor, too. People assume their buildings to be fully real, giving them as much credit on this score as they possibly can. Who of the public can tell sheetrock-on-studs from a plaster wall? Who but an architect can tell whether an arch is really carrying a load? On the other hand, who doesn't know that the Bellagio in Las Vegas is not Bellagio in Northern Italy? They know the Bellagio in Las Vegas to be what it is: a huge concoction and experience – with, yes, real flowers and real water out front. Matters are more problematic when chain bookstores, stocked with best-sellers and staffed by 20-year-olds, disport themselves as cozy haunts for bibliophiles.

A world without circuses is not one I want to live in, nor a world of circuses where nothing is what it seems. The authenticity of an architecture that takes as its goal the embodiment of quiet realness should be possible to achieve. Many ordinary people want that sort of realness, too, and long to have experiences of it that are not obviously for sale. I offer this analysis of architecture's realness as a tool for thinking about the issue, and suggest that we look to the work of Aalto, Van Eyck, Kahn, Scarpa, and Zumthor for guidance as to what authentic architecture might look like in modern times. We look to Aalto for his nondoctrinaire yet fully material renderings of new and useful form; Van Eyck for his seemingly unlimited attentiveness to perceptual and social realities; Kahn for his ability to bring intimacy and immensity together using the simplest materials, and to make spaces that are more generous and dignifying than called for. Then we value Scarpa for developing a vocabulary both curious and inevitable, like new nature, speaking straight to the heart, and Zumthor for reminding us that admirable simplicity is never simple, that architecture is tactile, that the land is our larger home. And how much more there is to learn from thousands of unassuming yet generous old buildings that still dot the American landscape, patiently awaiting our attention.